

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPHETIC OFFICE

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Recently, while contemplating the subject of the prophetic office, I had a dream. Usually I am not much impressed by my dreams. In fact, when I awake I seldom can remember them. But this one left such a vivid impression on my mind that I want to share it with you. I dreamed I was trying to explain to some young people the process of publishing magazines a generation ago. I began with my experience in the print shop of Far Eastern Academy in Shanghai when I was a teenager.

In those days I held in my left hand a small metal tray we used to call a "stick." I set it to the correct column width, then composed by picking up letters of the alphabet from the California type case in front of me, and placing them one by one in the "stick" to form words and paragraphs. I justified the lines by pushing space pieces between the words until the line was tight. When I had perhaps a dozen lines in the stick, I would carefully remove them and place them in an oblong metal tray called a "galley." I continued the process until I had enough column inches to fill the paper. Then I would make up pages on a surface called the "stone."

The editor under whom I worked, incidentally, was C. C. Crisler, the secretary of the China Division, who had been one of Ellen G. White's chief helpers during her closing years at Elmshaven. One of the darkest moments of my young life as

a printer's devil (the usual term for an apprentice) was when I pried several galleys of type that I had spent most of a day setting.

Later, when I attended Pacific Union College, I became a Linotype operator and became proficient enough to keep the elevator hung, which meant I could have a new line ready for casting before the machine completed its cycle on the preceding line. I also learned to clean up what was called a "squirt," when a bent matrix or other flaw permitted the molten lead to escape during the casting process.

As for pictorial illustrations, we used zinc plates mounted on wooden blocks. We called these block-mounted illustrations "cuts," and having once produced them, we kept them on file for possible reuse. When I was editor of the *Review*, we routinely drew on this file. When we wanted to be creative by bleeding one of these pictures off a page, we had to know which pages we could use in this way without having the cuts smashed by the grippers on the sheet-fed press.

One other thing. A magazine such as the *Review* usually was made up of two signatures of 16 pages each, the signatures being run consecutively, then combined and trimmed. The first signature of the *Review*, one sheet of paper at a time, was run on a flat-bed press in about 12 hours near the end of the week; then the second signature, with late news on the Back Page, followed at the first of the next week, after the pressman had done the "make-ready."

All of this is a far cry from the publishing process today, in which the original key stroke is captured, the typeface of an entire article can be changed in an instant by pressing a button, pages are composed on a computer, pictures can be placed on any page of a magazine, and an entire magazine of 32 pages can be produced in a single run of a few hours on a rotary, four-color offset press.

Now, let us say that a young printer today decides to learn all he can about how printing was done in the past. How helpful will it be to examine all the modern publishing

machines and processes? Will this make him an authority on how things were done in the past? Will this give him answers to all the questions that might be raised concerning the problems faced by printers in previous generations, and the processes involved in producing first-class publications?

The answer is No. To truly understand, he would need to study the machinery of the past. And, beyond that, he would need to step into a time machine of some sort in order to actually participate in the publishing processes of the past and be affected emotionally by the experience.

I have spent considerable time reviewing this because in my dream I saw a blank, uncomprehending look on the faces of the modern young people when I finished my attempt to describe how printing was done in the past, and it occurred to me that even our best efforts to understand the prophetic office leave a great deal to be desired. Between us and reality "there is a great gulf fixed," even as it was between the rich man and Lazarus. The same may be said of studying the natural world to explain origins, and studying Scripture by the historical-critical method to understand inspiration and revelation.

We cannot here begin to deal with the prophetic office exhaustively, but I shall touch on the six aspects that follow.

1. Our Personal Attitude As We Study the Prophetic Office.

In approaching the subject, we need to be humble lest God ask us as He asked Job: "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding" (Job 38:2-4).

I hope God is amused when we make uninformed pronouncements about the prophetic office. Since none of us, so far as I know, is a prophet, we hardly are authorities on the subject. But even prophets would be reticent to claim they understand the prophetic office perfectly, for they would say

that their experience as a prophet is different from that of others. Because the experience and mission of no two prophets are identical, even the prophets' understanding of the prophetic office are likely to be different. Moreover, producing a prophet is not an exact science. In mathematics, 2 plus 2 always equals 4. But God and inspiration plus a human being never equals two identical products. Making two cookies exactly alike is one thing; making two prophets just alike is quite another. In making a prophet, God must take the entire person—body, soul, spirit, intelligence, personality, weaknesses, strengths, education, idiosyncrasies—then endeavor through that person to proclaim His message and accomplish a special mission.

In our attempt to understand the prophetic office, we as Seventh-day Adventists are in a better position to make accurate assessments than are some others. Most Christians have only the inductive method with which to work. Seventh-day Adventists can also use the deductive method. Inasmuch as Ellen G. White filled the prophetic office in this church for approximately 70 years, we can examine her life, writings, and methods of divine communication to see how inspiration works. But even with this advantage, the most we can say about the prophetic office is that we are students of this subject, not authorities. We are learning constantly.

In a sense we are like a hiker who each evening writes down his observations about a distant mountain range. Each day as he draws closer to the mountain, he sees more clearly. Thus he revises his comments. What at a distance appeared to be a single peak turns out to be three peaks. What he thought was a glacier, actually is a huge outcropping of rock. What he thought was a fire break is a magnificent waterfall. Instead of being upset by these revelations and declaring the mountain range to be fraudulent and deceptive, he rejoices that past misconceptions have been corrected and that he has obtained a clearer view of reality.

Thus it has been with us in seeking to understand the

prophetic office. In recent years we have learned that the prophetic office is less mechanical than we had thought. We have learned that a prophet may use not only his own words to articulate divine messages but also the words of both inspired and uninspired people. We have learned that truth can be presented in various ways, depending on the background, perspective, and even the purpose of the inspired message-giver. (See *The Great Controversy*, pp. 6, 8.) Far from destroying faith, these understandings have broadened our horizons and provided a firmer foundation for our faith.

No doubt we have more to learn. But as we seek to understand better the supernatural mysteries of the prophetic office, we do well to heed God's warning to Moses as he approached the burning bush: "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Ex 3:5).

2. Why the Prophetic Office Was Created.

Why does the prophetic office exist? This question underlines the fact that offices and products arise out of need. Eyeglasses were created because people had defective eyesight. Printing was invented because people needed a better way to produce material for mass distribution. Automobiles were invented because people needed a faster mode of transportation.

In the case of the prophetic office, it was created because of two major factors: (1) The entrance of sin, which made face-to-face communication with God impossible (Isa 59:2; Ex 33:20); and (2) God is a God of infinite love (1 John 4:8; Jer 31:3; Ps 103:13), hence He was not willing to let the human family perish (John 3:16). But to rescue men and women from the pit into which they had fallen and to restore them to their first estate, God must help them understand the kind of God He is; He must make clear how they may be reconciled to Him; and they must know His laws, ideals, and purposes for them.

I want to emphasize that all aspects of the prophetic office

are an evidence of the infinite love of God. When we understand this and have a mind-set that is controlled by this view, we will welcome not only the encouraging counsels of the prophet but also the inspired person's rebukes and demands for reform. Instead of resisting God's will as revealed through the prophet, we will, like Saul on the road to Damascus, ask eagerly, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Instead of looking upon the prophet as an adversary or a kill-joy, we will look upon that individual as a dear friend who is trying to help us reach the worthwhile goals and objectives that we would most desire if we had true wisdom and our minds were not clouded by the results of six thousand years of sin.

In one sense, the attitude that we reveal toward the prophet shows what our attitude is toward God, for the message is not the prophet's own; it is God's message, given first to Jesus, then to the angel, and finally to the prophet (Rev 1:1-5). In His commission to the seventy, Jesus established this principle by saying: "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me" (Luke 10:16; cf. John 13:20).

God's infinite love for the human race has prompted Him throughout history to use almost every conceivable way to communicate with humanity. Among His various methods have been: angels (Heb 1:14; Ps 34:7; Gen 19:15; Num 22:31-35; Matt 1:18-25; Gen 22:11, 15); creation, or the natural world (Rom 1:20; Acts 14:17; Ps 19:1, 2); Urim and Thummim (Num 27:21); dreams (1 Sam 28:6; Gen 40, 41; Dan 2-4); a voice from heaven (Matt 3:17; 17:5; John 12:28; Ex 19:9, 19); the Holy Spirit (Prov 3:6; Isa 30:21; Matt 10:19, 20); Jesus in person (Heb 1:1, 2; John 14:9); and, of course, prophets (Amos 3:7; Num 12:6; 2 Chron 36:16).

3. The Multi-faceted Character of the Prophetic Office.

The work assigned to prophets has been many-faceted. Unlike the picture of the Bible prophet held by many today,

the prophet was not primarily a predictor of future events, and certainly not a predictor of the kind of events that make good headline copy for sensationalist magazines. Not all prophets were given the same mission, nor did they do the same kind of work, but all spoke for God; all communicated Heaven-inspired messages. Some prophets set forth divine standards for human conduct, some revealed God's purposes for individuals and for nations, some protested against prevailing evils, some encouraged the people to faithfulness, some strengthened and guided national rulers, some directed building and other kinds of activities, some served as teachers. In the course of their work, some performed miracles, some wrote books. In every case, true prophets served a body of people as God's spokespersons; they were not merely instructed of God at the personal or family level.

4. Some Elements God Must Consider When He Calls a Person to the Prophetic Office.

In choosing a prophet, it is necessary for God to take into account both the person He would select to fill the prophetic office and the audience to be reached. Not all minds can receive truth accurately and communicate it equally well. Nor can all the people in an audience understand equally well and appreciate the messages presented by a single spokesperson.

Let us note first the considerations that must be taken into account in selecting a person for the prophetic office. Doing so will help us better understand Ellen White's meaning when she wrote: "It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God" (MS 24, 1886; *Selected Messages*, 1: 21).

When God calls a person to the prophetic office, He inspires the entire person, for a human being is a totality whose parts cannot be abstracted. Thus, before choosing a person to bear a given message, God must take into account the person's background, education, personality, intellectual abilities, leadership qualities, ability to communicate (orally, and perhaps, in writing), and experience. Inasmuch as generations of sin have impaired the ability of the human mind to grasp truth clearly, God must look for a person whose mind can provide almost distortion reception.

We might illustrate this aspect by pointing out that some people seem to see life in "technicolor." Everything is the "brightest," the "biggest," the "most beautiful," the "most horrible." By contrast, other people see life in "black-and-white" and "shades of gray." For them, nothing is "super." They observe facts carefully and accurately, without exaggeration or distortion. So, which kind of mind will God choose as His prophet? Probably at times, both; or maybe neither, but a mind somewhere between the two.

The choice may be determined partly by the kind of truth God intends the prophet to communicate. If the message is one of encouragement and hope, a prophet with an upbeat personality may be able to convey it most effectively. If the message is one of rebuke and warning, a prophet with a somewhat pessimistic, somber outlook may present it most persuasively. If the message involves mathematics, a prophet with number skills and a penchant for accuracy may be needed. Let me repeat, God takes many factors into account when He calls a person to the prophetic office, for He must accept the person as a whole and imbue the whole person with the Holy Spirit.

Sacred history is replete with examples of the different kinds of persons whom God has called. As illustrations we might mention Abraham, a rich man, brought up in a heathen environment in a compromising family; Moses, guided by conscientious parents but educated in part by people who

worshiped false gods and espoused false values; Samuel, born to a conscientious mother but reared by a permissive, latitudinarian high priest in an environment that favored cynicism toward religious practices; David, a king who was also a career soldier; Amos, a poorly educated blue-collar shepherd; Daniel, a highly-educated expatriate who served with distinction as a statesman in the land of his exile; and the apostle Paul, a Jew by race but a Roman by birth, who, although highly educated and steeped in the traditions of Judaism, was proselyted to Christianity by the Lord Himself and became the church's most influential and articulate spokesman for his new-found faith.

But whatever the type of person God calls to the prophetic office, the message conveyed through the human instrument is God's message. Whether delivered orally or in writing, it is both human and divine. God inspires the prophet, hence the words through which that individual proclaims God's message become the Word of God. On this point Ellen White says: "The Bible, with its God given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' John 1:14 (*The Great Controversy*, p. 8).

God chooses certain people to the prophetic office not merely because of their ability to grasp truth with reasonable objectivity, but because of the wide variety of minds to which they must bear their message. That this consideration is important may be demonstrated even by the experience of God's messengers who do not have the gift of prophecy.

For example, evangelists find that not everyone responds to them equally well. In any audience, a number of people may be enamored of the evangelist and willing to accept readily almost anything he says. But in the same audience others sit impassively as they listen to his most logical presentations and strongest appeals. The reaction to prophets is similar.

Thus, because of God's great love for every member of the human family, when He calls men and women to the prophetic office He considers both the total person that He is calling and the variety of people who will hear the divine message.

5. To What Extent Being an Inspired Person Changes the Prophet.

When people are called to the prophetic office, do they forsake their humanity? Do they become sinless? Do they never make mistakes? Do they become infallible? No to all these questions. It is true that the Holy Scriptures call the inspired writers "holy" (2 Pet 1:21), but in those same Scriptures the writers documented not only their own sins and mistakes, but also those of their inspired predecessors and contemporaries. As for infallibility, Mrs. White wrote: "I never claimed it; God alone is infallible" (*Selected Messages*, 1: 37). We must not set a higher standard for those who are called to the prophetic office than does the inspired Word.

Like the Bible itself, prophets have a human side—a side that is subject to inconsistent conduct, disorganization, forgetfulness, and other foibles. The apostle Paul wisely observed that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7). But we dare not discount or dismiss the message of the prophet simply because the human instrument is an imperfect, earthen vessel. If we love and trust God, we will believe that He loves us with an everlasting love and that He is working with the best instrument available to provide us with the very help we need to be victorious in our battle with sin and deception.

6. The Authority of the Prophetic Office.

Does the fact that the prophet is imperfect reduce the authority of the prophet's message? No. Scripture makes clear that Jesus is the One who speaks through the prophet. (See 1 Cor 1:4-6; 1 Pet 1:10-12; Rev 1:1, 10, 11; 19:10; 22:16, 20.) When a voice of authority declares that ballistic missiles are

approaching and orders everyone to hurry to air raid shelters, everyone must comply immediately, whether he or she hears the command on a high-fidelity stereo, a black-and-white TV set, or a pocket-size, battery-operated radio. The fidelity is of minimal importance; the instrument is of little consequence; only the authority of the one delivering the message is of importance.

Moreover, since Jesus is the supreme Message-giver, the prophet's message is of absolute authority, whether given in Old Testament times, New Testament times, or post-New Testament times. It defies logic to say that what Jesus said before the Biblical canon was closed is more true, more inspired, or more authoritative than what He may have said through a chosen spokesperson after the close of the canon.

In proclaiming God's message, the prophets made it clear that the message was not their own, it was God's. Scores of times in the Old Testament the prophets emphasized the divine origin of their message, saying, "The word of the Lord came." Among those who used this expression, we might cite Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Solomon, Jehu, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Ellen White, too, understood that the messages she bore were not her own, they were God's, and that therefore they carried supernatural authority. One night her heavenly guide said, "I have a work for you to do. You must speak the words given you by the Lord. . . . It is not you speaking, but the Lord speaking through you" (*The Upward Look*, p. 339).

At another time a messenger from heaven said, "Bear the testimony that the Lord Jesus has for you to bear in reproof, in rebuke, in the work of encouraging and lifting up the soul; 'teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'" (*The Upward Look*, p. 168).

When Israel was in Egyptian bondage, the Lord met Moses at the burning bush and commissioned him to deliver His people and lead them to the Promised Land. "Come now

therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10). Moses pleaded inability to undertake the task, but God promised: "Go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" (Ex 4:10). "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I am the Lord: speak thou unto Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say unto thee" (Ex 6:29). Thus it is clear that a prophet speaks for God. The authority is not that of a human being, it is the authority of Almighty God. This concept should make it easy for us to relate to the message, no matter how frail or inadequate the bearer.

Conclusion

We have touched on six aspects of the prophetic office. If time permitted, we might discuss many other aspects, including the divine call of the prophet, the various categories of prophets, the gift as set forth in the New Testament, the task of the prophets, modalities of the messages as given to the prophets, hermeneutical principles in understanding the prophets' messages, and whether the work of the prophetic office ends with the death of a prophet. But even a discussion of all these topics would not exhaust our attempt to understand the prophetic office.

In the final analysis, it is not our intellectual knowledge of the prophetic office that is of major importance, it is our attitude toward the prophets and their God-given messages. I believe that the following two texts of Scripture make clear what our attitude should be: "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper" (2 Chron 20:20). "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isa 66:2).